

STATUS REPORT

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FOR HIGHWAY SAFETY

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“uncommonly
fast and fun
to drive”

Car ads

today pitch speed and performance but rarely safety. This trend is clear from a recent study of virtually all car and minivan commercials that appeared on national television dur-

ing 1998. The study was conducted by InterData researchers working with Institute staff. The researchers also looked at samples of commercials that aired during 1983, 1988, and 1993. Together these ads suggest that the glorification of power and speed is almost as pervasive now as it was 10 or 15 years ago.

For example, a 1998 Mitsubishi ad (see cover) features a young female driver who appears to break the sound barrier as she barrels down the highway in her red sports car. The message? The Eclipse is “uncommonly fast and fun to drive.”

Another recent commercial is for the Saturn L series, showing the sporty sedan bearing down on another car on the highway. Though the driver of the Saturn appears to be blissfully at ease with how fast he’s going, the driver ahead of him tauntingly steps on the gas as if he has been challenged to race. The Saturn then “wins” with its apparently superior power.

These ads don’t reflect the big business that auto safety has become. More and more consumers say they look for safety when buying a vehicle. In turn, auto manufacturers are actively competing for consumers’ dollars by engineering a wide range of features into their fleets and claiming all sorts of safety improvements. They’re just not advertising safety.

Instead, many car commercials either ignore safety or undermine it by obscuring the fact that driving fast or aggressively increases motorists’ crash risk. This advertising strategy is strikingly at odds with the value consumers now are placing on safety.

Percent of new car buyers who say safety features are “extremely” or “very” important

1981	64
1983	67
1985	73
1987	74
1989	76
1991	77
1993	79
1995	83
1997	83
1999	84

“Safety steps into the spotlight,” *Automotive News*, March 6, 2000.

Top themes of auto commercials in 1998: percentage of ads with various themes

Performance	17
Sales incentives	15
Good value for money	12
New and improved, unique	11
Quality, reliability, durability	8
Styling	4
Comfort, convenience	4
Luxury, prestige	4
Well engineered	3
Safety	2

Ferguson et al. 2000. Content analysis of television advertising for cars and minivans. Arlington, VA: Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

ingly at odds with the value consumers now are placing on safety.

In quantifiable terms, performance is the overriding theme in 17 percent of the 1998 car ads, making this the single most prominent theme. Both power and speed are featured in almost half of the ads. Maneuverability, ride, and handling are in 70 percent.

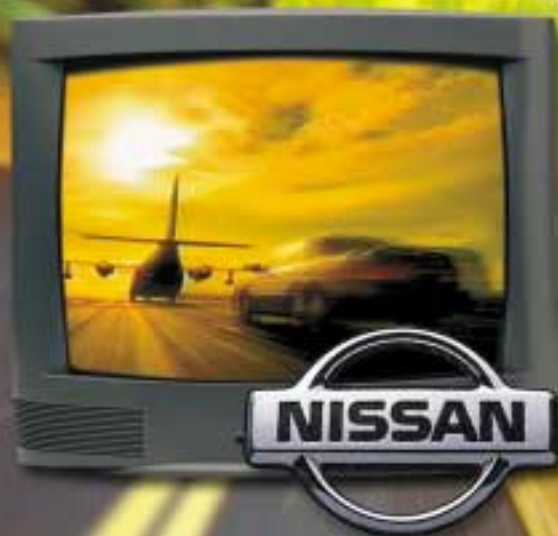
“Despite all we know about how high speed contributes to injuries and deaths, this kind of performance is still being marketed to consumers as the defining aspect of a car,” says the Institute’s research vice president, Susan Ferguson. “Even when performance isn’t front and center in a commercial, it’s present on some level in about half of all the ads.”

Safety barely registers as an advertising theme. It generally appears in fewer than 10 percent of car commercials, with the exception of 1993 when it appeared in about a third. This short-lived emphasis on safety came at a time when auto manufacturers were aggressively touting the availability of frontal airbags, which were being phased in ahead of new requirements from the federal government.

Manufacturers may be missing a big marketing opportunity by choosing to advertise performance and not safety. This choice runs counter to the industry’s own data showing that consumer interest in safety is on the rise. For example, a 1999 DaimlerChrysler survey of new car buyers reported by *Automotive News* shows 84 percent saying safety features are “extremely” or “very” important factors in their vehicle buying decisions — up from 64 percent in 1981.

The Institute obtained similar results from a previous survey (see *Status Report*, July 6, 1996). Seventy-three percent of respondents who had recently bought or leased vehicles said they considered safety an important factor in their purchase decisions. But many respondents also said they assume most cars are safe. Few said (continues on p.4)





"more powerful
than ever"

"may come in
handy, say, if you
are ever late
for a flight"

"for those seeking
ground superiority"



"delivering
powerful
acceleration"



(continued from p.2) they sought information on their prospective vehicles' crash test performance or on-the-road safety performance prior to making their purchases. What they did seek was information about safety features, most often air bags.

This way of thinking about safety is mirrored in auto advertising. In the current survey, the few commercials with safety themes refer-

ence features like airbags or antilock brakes. Little attention is paid to other factors — vehicle size, weight, and structure — that influence crashworthiness. Nor do the ads emphasize crash test performance.

While crash test information doesn't often appear in advertisements, it has been available to the public through the government's New Car Assessment Program since 1978 and



Advertising largely self regulated but controls more explicit in other countries

When automakers cross the line into irresponsible advertising, the Institute doesn't hesitate to comment. A recent example is an April letter from Institute president Brian O'Neill to General Motors concerning a Saturn commercial that illustrates and promotes speed. Past advertisements for Mitsubishi, Nissan, and Porsche cars also have drawn prompt criticism.

Why do speed-glorifying ads continue to appear? One factor is that much of the content of commercials on U.S. television is protected by the rights of free speech. The Federal Trade Commission, which has jurisdiction over most advertising, investigates cases of inaccurate, misleading, or harmful ads. The Federal Communications Commission, which has authority over the media outlets that sell advertising, says broadcasters must "operate in the public interest." However, no regulations under either

purview prohibit the depiction of driving at unsafe speeds.

In practice, judgments about the social responsibility of advertising are left to advertisers and broadcasters. Major television networks such as CBS and NBC say their extensive review processes weed out commercials that don't comply with their standards, including commercials that might encourage viewers to imitate depictions of risky driving.

Advertising industry groups, including the American Advertising Federation and the American Association of Advertising Agencies, also have voluntary standards. But specific rules for car ads aren't articulated.

For these reasons, groups in addition to the Institute continue to monitor the airwaves for bad ads. The Center for Science in the Public Interest, for example, coordinates the annual Harlan Page Hubbard Awards to spotlight the most egregious examples of irresponsible advertising.

In countries other than the United States, ads also

are generally self regulated. However, in some cases standards are more explicit than they are here. For instance, New Zealand's Code for Road Safety in Advertising prohibits ads "glorifying excessive speed."

Britain's Independent Television Commission codes go further. On speed, the guidance states that "speed is not an acceptable platform for automotive advertising Nor may advertising present driving at high speeds as exciting or exhilarating, or portray driving as if it were a competitive sport. Conversely, there must be no suggestion that driving safely or cautiously is staid, dull or boring."

Likewise, the codes for print ads in Britain proclaim that "advertisers should not make speed or acceleration claims the predominant message."

The limits of regulatory power may not be negotiable, but firming up voluntary standards in the United States, as in other countries, might prevent more bad commercials from slipping through.

from the Institute since 1995. In recent years manufacturers have touted both government and Institute crash test results for a few models.

The Institute's crash test ratings, used only once or twice in commercials that aired before 1999, have appeared since then in both print and television spots run by BMW, Ford, Lexus, Mercedes, Subaru, Toyota, Volkswagen, and Volvo. But overall, commercials with safety themes still represent the minority of advertising spots.

So while the safety pitch may be becoming more prominent, the larger problem persists — speed and power continue to dominate the ads.

"Promoting the performance and high-speed capabilities of cars in advertising is irresponsible," Institute president Brian O'Neill says. "It subverts efforts to address aggressive driving and high speed as serious safety problems, and it should have no place in advertising."

For a copy of "Content analysis of television advertising for cars and minivans, 1993-98" by S.A. Ferguson et al., write: Publications, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 1005 N. Glebe Rd., Arlington, VA 22201.

New survey looks at high DUI, death rates among some Hispanic groups

An Institute-funded survey may provide insight into why some Hispanic groups have more than their share of alcohol-related driving violations and deaths. The new study surveys Mexican American and Caucasian men who were arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol (DUI) in California.

The focus on ethnicity reflects a concern that Hispanics aren't sharing in the national trend toward less drinking and driving. In national roadside surveys, the percentage of Hispanic drivers with blood alcohol concentrations (BACs) exceeding 0.10 percent was twice as high in 1996 as in 1973. At the same time, the rates declined among both Caucasian and African American drivers (see *Status Report*, March 22, 1997).

Hispanics have higher rates of DUI arrests and fatal crashes involving drivers with high BACs. But "these rates aren't uniform across all Hispanic groups," explains Susan Ferguson, the Institute's research vice president. "Alcohol-related deaths are more prevalent among Mexican Americans than among Caucasians, but that's not the case with Cuban or Puerto Rican Americans."

Mexican Americans make up the majority of the nation's fastest growing ethnic population, so improving drinking and driving rates among Mexican Americans would translate into a much wider benefit. "If we could take even half or a third out of the Hispanic DUI population, it would be a major event," says researcher Marcelline Burns of the Southern California Research Institute, which conducted the survey.

The survey queried 300 Mexican American men and 300 Caucasian men in Long Beach, California. In each group, half had been arrested for DUI and half were comparison respondents recruited locally. The questions focused on alcohol use and attitudes toward drinking, beliefs about how alcohol relates to impairment, and knowledge of DUI laws.

Mexican Americans reported heavier and more frequent drinking compared with Cau-

hol and impairment, how they view their own ability to handle alcohol, and whether they're familiar with drinking and driving laws. In fact, knowledge of the laws was found lacking. More than half of Mexican Americans and about a third of Caucasians indicated they don't know the BAC threshold (0.08 percent) above which it's illegal to drive in California.

Misconceptions about how alcohol consumption relates to impairment also are evi-



casians, a finding that's consistent with other research. Although Mexican Americans who had been arrested didn't report heavier or more frequent drinking than their counterparts in the comparison group, the arrestees were more likely to say they believe they can drive safely after drinking. They also reported more occasions when they had driven after drinking and more past DUI violations.

These findings indicate that heavy drinking, although common among some Mexican Americans, is only part of the problem. What also matters is what people know about alco-

dent. Past research has shown that people generally underestimate the number of drinks to reach the threshold above which it's illegal to drive (see *Status Report*, Nov. 27, 1993). Respondents in this survey likewise tended to underestimate what it takes to exceed a 0.08 percent BAC. But some then overestimated the number of drinks it would take to become an unsafe driver. Mexican Americans estimated 8 to 10 drinks on average compared with 4 or 5 drinks estimated by Caucasians.

This suggests that Mexican Americans, more than Caucasians, (continues on p.6)

(continued from p.5) don't understand what 0.08 percent means in practical terms, Burns says. "They think if they have a couple of beers they'll be at 0.08 BAC, but on the other hand they don't think they'll be impaired or drunk until they have many times that number of beers."

Without an understanding that a 0.08 percent BAC results in impairment, there's only the threat of getting caught to motivate drivers not to drink and drive. But the majority of men who already had been arrested for DUI, both Mexican American and Caucasian, said they think it's unlikely they'll be stopped by police if drinking. The expectation of enforcement was much higher among comparison respondents.

Mexican Americans often demonstrated limited English proficiency. They were younger, had fewer years of education, and earned less than their Caucasian counterparts, though most of the Mexican Americans were employed. Many didn't have driver's licenses, and half of the unlicensed drivers never had attempted to get one.

Factors like these affect people's access to information and, in turn, shape attitudes. This is where Jeannette Noltenius, Executive Director of the Latino Council on Alcohol and Tobacco Prevention, sees the greatest need: "We commend the Institute for this study highlighting the need for strong, sustainable programs to reduce drinking and driving in the Latino community. It's more evident that people's attitudes toward drinking and driving need to change. This is where long-term education programs could make a positive difference."

Ferguson adds that "communicating the crash risks and other consequences of drinking, like any other public health and safety issue, requires a good deal of cultural sensitivity. This is why the effort to reach Mexican American drinking drivers needs to come from within that community. Those who understand the culture are best equipped to take the prevention message and convey it in a relevant, appropriate way."

For a copy of "Drinking and driving among Mexican American and Caucasian males" by S.A. Ferguson et al., write: Publications, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 1005 N. Glebe Rd., Arlington, VA 22201.

Flimsy SUV bumpers fail to resist damage in 5 mph crash tests

Some manufacturers are improving the bumpers on automobiles so consumers are less likely to face expensive repairs from low-speed collisions, but these improvements aren't carrying over to sport utility vehicles. Four of the five midsize SUVs recently tested by the Institute allowed excessive damage (see table) in a series of 5 mph crash tests.

Best and worst performers: The 2001 BMW X5 "is the only SUV in this group with halfway decent bumpers," says Institute president Brian O'Neill. "The rear bumper is good. It allowed only about \$200 damage in the pole impact, which usually is the toughest of our four bumper tests. The X5 also performed well in the rear-into-flat-barrier test, but there was too much damage in the front-flat and front-angle barrier tests."

The worst performer is the 2000 model Isuzu Trooper. It sustained more than \$11,000 damage in the four crash tests, including more than \$3,000 damage in the 5 mph rear-into-pole impact. Intrusion of the spare tire mounted on the back of this SUV crushed both of the rear tailgates and shattered the glass. "This is a very poor performer. The Trooper is the worst midsize SUV we've ever tested," O'Neill also says.

Sales brochures for the Trooper point to its "endurance" and claim it's "tough enough to haul a 5,000 pound trailer." O'Neill counters that the Trooper "isn't tough enough to withstand a simple impact at little more than walking speed without thousands of dollars worth of damage. It's tough enough to tow a heavy trailer, but don't bump this vehicle into anything in reverse because it's so fragile."

Another poor performer is the 2001 Mitsubishi Montero with about \$9,000 damage in the Institute's 5 mph bumper tests. Once again, the rear tailgate and glass were crushed in the rear-into-pole impact by the spare tire mounted on the back. Cost of damage after this test: about \$2,800. Total damage to the Montero in all four impacts



	5 MPH Front into Flat Barrier
2001 BMW X5	\$794
2000 Nissan Xterra	\$577
Isuzu Rodeo	
2000 model	\$1,769
1996 model	\$1,207
Mitsubishi Montero	
2001 model	\$1,210
1996 model	\$539
2000 Isuzu Trooper	\$2,890

Note: Costs reflect August 2000 prices.



increased since the last time the Institute tested this SUV, largely because of the increased damage sustained in the pole test.

Rodeo performance improves somewhat: The Isuzu Rodeo also was previously tested by the Institute. The 1996 model was designed with the same tailgate-mounted spare tire as the new Trooper and redesigned Mitsubishi Montero. But the 2000 model Rodeo comes with the spare tire located underneath the vehicle (tailgate-mount optional), and damage was reduced from more than \$2,000 in each rear crash test of the 1996 model to less than \$1,000 for the 2000 model.

The Trooper is a very poor performer. It's the worst midsize sport utility vehicle the Institute ever tested.

One reason SUVs perform so poorly in the Institute's bumper tests is that they aren't subject to any requirements to prevent damage in low-speed impacts. Automobile bumpers have to meet federal standards in 2.5 mph impacts, and most of the bumper systems on cars include foam or other material to absorb crash energy.

"But the bumpers on most SUVs — including both Isuzu models (Trooper and Rodeo), Montero, and Xterra — don't have anything effective to absorb energy," O'Neill says. He adds that "the BMW X5 does. It has energy absorbers on the back, which is one reason it performed so well in the rear impacts" (rear-into-flat-barrier and rear-into-pole crash tests).

"SUVs may be advertised as rugged. Manufacturers tell potential buyers they can drive these vehicles anywhere adventure leads them. But consumers can expect big repair bills if they're unlucky enough to bump these so-called rugged vehicles into something at slow speeds," O'Neill concludes.

DAMAGE REPAIR COSTS

PH CRASH TEST RESULTS, MIDSIZE SPORT UTILITY VEHICLES

Rear into Flat Barrier	Front into Angle Barrier	Rear into Pole	Total Damage 4 Tests	Average Damage Each Test
\$254	\$949	\$190	\$2,187	\$547
\$884	\$1,994	\$991	\$4,446	\$1,112
\$924	\$1,932	\$552	\$5,177	\$1,294
\$2,433	\$2,101	\$2,375	\$8,116	\$2,029
\$2,495	\$2,525	\$2,831	\$9,061	\$2,265
\$2,656	\$1,915	\$1,259	\$6,369	\$1,592
\$2,618	\$2,333	\$3,317	\$11,158	\$2,790

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